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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ABUJA 000658

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: ELECTION COMMISSION CHAIRMAN SAYS
EVERYTHING'S ON SCHEDULE

Classified by Ambassador Howard F. Jeter, reason 1.5 (b).

1. (C) Summary: During a March 12 meeting, Independent National Election Commission (INEC) Chairman Abel Guobadia told Ambassador Jeter that INEC preparations were on schedule; INEC would be ready to conduct elections in April and a postponement was not contemplated. To demonstrate INEC's readiness, Guobadia said INEC had finalized 90% of the voters list and was ahead of schedule on ordering ballot boxes and ballot papers. However, he claimed INEC needed an additional appropriation of 12 billion Naira (USG approximately 920 million) for election day expenses (travel expenses, workers stipends, etc.) Guobadia's picture of readiness contrasted with one painted by opposition political parties. They claim INEC is bumbling and highly partisan; they also say the electoral fix is on. The truth may lie somewhere between. INEC has exerted itself more than the suspicious opposition parties will acknowledge; however, its performance in many areas, especially voter registration, has been substandard. Much of the criticism of INEC continues to be legitimate even at this late stage. Despite Guobadia's assurances, INEC has must make a gigantic, late hour push before it is ready. End Summary.

2. (C) During a March 12 meeting with INEC Chairman Guobadia, Ambassador underscored the importance of successful elections. Nigeria would take a momentous step in the right direction by holding its first successful elections under civilian government. INEC would have won itself an enviable place when the history of this period is written, the Ambassador stressed. The entire world is watching and hoping. He added that Nigeria likewise owed a special duty to the sub-region, a region where its leadership was preeminent and much needed. Noting that West Africa had become an increasingly troubled neighborhood, Jeter emphasized that credible elections could be a democratic fillip to Nigeria's neighbors. Conversely, poor elections could dash the hopes of democracy elsewhere in the region, and further afield on the continent. Failed elections would inevitably spark greater unrest and violence at home.

3. (C) Ambassador Jeter informed Guobadia that he had hosted a March 11 meeting with political party leaders. All the parties in attendance uniformly criticized INEC's election management. He suggested that INEC might consider calling a special meeting of political party chairmen along with the police, State Security Services (SSS) and the Police Service Commission (PSC) to discuss the parties' concerns about electoral preparations and security. Jeter added that such a meeting could address numerous doubts and misgivings the parties had about INEC. Moreover, the parties seemed keenly interested in such a meeting, the Ambassador said.

4. (C) Chairman Guobadia responded that INEC stood ready to meet the parties. In fact, he had hosted such a meeting earlier that day but only 12 of the 30 parties attended. At the previous regular meeting with the parties a few weeks before, only four parties showed, the Chairman asserted. (Comment: Guobadia's description of party attendance was accurate. After his meeting with Ambassador Jeter, Guobadia met party leaders on March 17 to discuss the anti-violence Code of Conduct. At the March 17 unveiling of the Code, only nine parties attended the session and signed the instrument. The ruling PDP and ANPP, the two largest parties, failed to attend. During the March 19 special elections stakeholders meeting called by the President, the remaining parties vowed their assent and all but four have signed. Unfortunately, the PDP and ANPP have yet to sign due to a feud over which one should go first. End Comment.)

5. (U) Guobadia continued that INEC regularly conferred with the Police, PSC and SSS regarding election day

security, particularly for INEC personnel and sensitive election material such as ballots, ballot boxes and vote tabulation sheets. He explained that the National Police force had only 90,000 active officers, meaning a deployment of less than one officer for each of the 120,000 polling stations nationwide. To address the obvious gap, help would be needed from the SSS and other security related agencies.

Voter's Registration - Is The Cup Half Full Or Half Empty?

16. (C) On the all important issue of voter registration, The Chairman claimed INEC was 90% finished with finalizing the voters rolls. He claimed that most states had begun to display the list. He added that 10% of the total voter applications were discarded for being fraudulent.

17. (C) Comment: Guobadia's portrayal of voter's registration was inaccurate almost to the point of dissimulation. According to our best evidence, lists were displayed in only a few states and only a few areas in those states. INEC has yet to finalize and display the voters list in every state. INEC announced subsequent to this meeting with the Ambassador that the lists would be displayed and voters cards made available the second week in April, just a few days before the April 12 National Assembly elections. This probably will not provide sufficient time for the statutorily required period for the public to raise objections to the list. Moreover, INEC had announced in early March that the claims period was March 11-12, although the lists were not ready for the vast majority of voters to review. The litany of grievances with the registration process has caused the political parties and much of the public to believe that INEC has already significantly undermined the election and to suspect that INEC will not be prepared to handle election logistics. End Comment)

18. (C) Guobadia acknowledged that INEC's late release of the voters rolls had not gone unchallenged. The National Democratic Party (NPD) had filed suit claiming INEC had abrogated the electoral law by not publicizing the voters lists at least 60 days before the April elections commenced. In a legal interpretation not previously heard from INEC, the Chairman contended the law simply required INEC to have concluded the actual process of receiving registration applications from the voters 60 days prior to the election. INEC's contention was that the 60-day requirement did not refer to displaying the voters roll. (Comment: This interpretation is novel and expectant. Simply put, INEC has not published the rolls. It needs to defend itself from charges of flouting the law. This new, facile interpretation will further diminish INEC credibility; INEC's original timetable had scheduled the publication of the voters roll prior to February in observance of the 60 day requirement. End Comment.)

The Ballots Are Coming, The Ballots Are Coming!

19. (C) On the positive side, Guobadia announced that the delivery of ballot paper and ballot boxes was on schedule, in fact, he claimed that vendor had wanted to send ballots and boxes ahead of time. Containers of ballot paper had already been delivered but Guobadia had to inform his suppliers in Canada, United Kingdom and Germany to halt delivery as INEC lacked sufficient warehouse space. Guobadia did not want the headache of procuring additional storage space and he feared tampering if too many ballots were in Nigeria too early. Guobadia remarked that the ballot papers would be significantly bulkier than the 1999 version -- due to the increased number of parties this time. Consequently, new boxes, manufactured in China, with larger openings would replace the ones used in 1999.

I Need Money For Election Day

10. (C) While stating that funding had been sufficient to meet pre-election day needs, Guobadia warned INEC required another 12 billion Naira for election day expenses, four billion for each of the three contests. (April 12 - National Assembly, April 19 - Presidential and gubernatorial, April 26 - possible run-off.) Major election day expenses Guobadia mentioned were stipends and

transportation costs for several hundred thousand poll workers, transport of material to and from polling stations and logistical support at vote tabulation centers. Guobadia expressed concern whether INEC would have sufficiently qualified administrators to manage vote tabulation centers properly. These collation centers were where the real problems would arise. "Here is where a vote of 1,000 can become 10,000," he contended. Because of the need for non-partisan, qualified managers at these sites, INEC has resorted to a special call to the private sector and retired senior civil servants to staff these crucial positions on election day. (Note: Newspapers report that INEC has received over 9 billion Naira from FY 03 appropriations to help meet these expenses.)

Monitors

11. (C) Guobadia stated the Foreign Ministry not INEC would vet the names of the foreign monitors. INEC's role was limited to providing badges once the MFA had approved the names. Regarding domestic monitors, INEC had the primary responsibility to vet and clear these individuals. INEC's main concern, in vetting the monitors, was that they be non-partisan. He added that domestic monitors would not have to register at INEC's national headquarters but could obtain accreditation at the various state headquarters. (Comment: Visiting Carter Center representatives expressed fears about INEC's capacity to register and accredit the expected 20,000-30,000 monitors. Ambassador arranged a meeting for them with Guobadia where they proposed that INEC simply register the organizations and provide them with numbered badges corresponding to the number of observers each organization planned to field. Guobadia claimed he liked the idea, but we are uncertain if it was implemented. End Comment.)

Comment

12. (C) Guobadia put his best foot forward but the road is long and the destination cannot be reached with only one or two steps. INEC is scrambling to be minimally ready for the April 12 National Assembly election. The National Assembly contests, in and of themselves, have not elicited much public interest; however, most people are interested or at least curious not because of the contests themselves but because the April 12 elections may provide INEC a dry-run for the big test -- the Presidential and Gubernatorial elections on April 19. Thus, the quality of the National Assembly will greatly influence perceptions going into the Presidential contest. At this late date, INEC can do little to improve voter registration. However, INEC may be forgiven many of its pre-election lapses if it is seen as conducting the balloting and the vote tabulation as a competent neutral agent. This achievement is still within INEC's reach but only if the Commission exerts itself mightily during the last waning days.

JETER